Slave, Slaveowner Descendants Create Project

Most of North Georgia’s Sautee Nacoochee Valley’s African-American residents can trace their roots to slave ancestors who labored in fields, mines, mills and manors throughout the area. After emancipation, the freed slaves carved out a place for themselves and called it Bean Creek.

When current residents expressed concerns about their largely untold and rapidly disappearing history, the Bean Creek History Project was born.

According to Caroline Crittenden, Project coordinator, documents trace tiny Bean Creek to at least 1863. “The settlement is probably older. An 1835 ledger records a freed slave, ‘Free Jack’, as working in the gold mines. It’s likely he lived at what is now Bean Creek, possibly with Native Americans who were first located there,” she said.

The road leading into the tiny settlement was once part of the historic Rabun Trail and before that, an ancient Cherokee thoroughfare. Stone piles scattered throughout the area mark Cherokee burial sites.

The Bean Creek History Project, created by Crittenden and adopted by the Sautee Nacoochee Community Association History Museum, involves multiple layers the community hopes will collectively preserve and celebrate a century and a half of North Georgian African-American history.

Central to the Project is the African American Heritage Site & Nature Preserve, where the history of the area will be told from a black perspective.

The Heritage Site, part of a three acre nature preserve donated by Lillian Heptinstall Everhart on the rim of Nacoochee Valley, contains a slave cabin donated by Jim and Courtney Johnston and moved a few hundred yards, maintaining its original compass orientation and using original foundation stones.

Careful cabin restoration and reconstruction by craftsmen involves traditional methods, tools and materials. A descendant of the original owner of the cabin gifted the project with sections of a white oak needed to match the few existing original roof shingles.

Reparations have produced an artifactual archeology of the families the cabin housed over the course of centuries. Unearthed pottery shards, cut nails and a button most likely from a U.S. officer’s military uniform that fell from the rafters hint at stories untold.

In an ironic twist, a newspaper report on the 1900 Paris Exhibition came to light beneath decades of wall coverings. Although Atlanta University professor W.E.B. DuBois swept the Exhibition with 15 gold, silver and bronze medals for his Exposition des Negres d’Amerique, a comprehensive portrait of slave descendants, little mention of his success appeared in reports in the States.

The Bean Creek Satellite Water System proposal is designed to answer the water crisis without compromising the integrity of the Historic District or eligible features, sites and structures within the community.

Descendants of both slaves and slave owners are working as one to honor Bean Creek’s past and improve its future, preserving and interpreting the story of slavery in Northeast Georgia.